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'Bebe' talk

It's never too early to start teaching your child a foreign language. Get started with these tips and products.

BY FELICIA PINKNEY
 SPECIAL TO THE STAR-TELEGRAM

I remember watching *Sesame Street* as a child and feeling mighty proud because I could say *agua* and count to 10 in Spanish.

These days, that barely cuts it. Just about everywhere you turn, some new product promises to teach young kids a foreign language.

Credit the glut of multicultural books, DVDs and learning toys to *Dora the Explorer*. The popular TV show debuted in 2000 and spawned similar bilingual programs, including *Maya & Miguel*, *Go, Diego, Go!*, and *Ni Hao, Kai-Lan*, which debuts next month on Nickelodeon and teaches basic Chinese.

But can kids really learn from Spanish-speaking Dora and bilingual Elmo? Not really, say Kendall King and Alison Mackey, authors of *The Bilingual Edge: Why, When and How to Teach Your Child a Second Language* (Collins, \$15.95).

They may develop an ear for another language by watching bilingual programs, but if you want your child to speak, say, Italian, he'll learn best from human interaction, the authors say. TV should merely be a supplement, say King and Mackey, both of whom are linguistics professors at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C.

"We are not saying don't use them -- as parents ourselves, we like [edutainment], too, for lots of reasons," Mackey says by e-mail. "They can be great supplements, but nothing replaces human interaction."

Even parents with limited skills in a second language can help preschoolers learn by having a word of the week, reading simple bilingual books, singing songs or playing games in that language.

For instance, play peek-a-boo in French, or count in Spanish while climbing the stairs. Older kids can watch foreign films, discuss stories in a foreign newspaper and listen to music by bilingual artists.

As for all those *Brainy Baby* language DVDs you've bought: Watch with your child, pause the disc regularly and ask simple questions about the video, King and Mackey say. More ways to learn:

Kids Love Spanish: Volume 1, Basic Words

Ages: 2 and older

What it is: 30-minute live-action DVD using repetition, bright colors and cute, catchy music; developed by sisters Krisse Brock and Julie Campbell, both of whom studied Spanish abroad.

How to interact with it: Have your own glass of *agua* or a bottle of *leche* and point them out while watching.

How'd we like it?: My 7-, 5- and 2-year-old got a kick out of seeing kids their age say *bebe* and *mama*. The repetition puts Dora's to shame -- you'll hear *hola* about 12 times in a row -- but I'd gladly watch this over the cartoon.

Details: \$17.99 each; seven-DVD box set \$99.99, www.kidslovespanish.com

Baby's First Words in either Chinese, French, Italian or Spanish

Ages: Newborn to 2

What it is: 60-minute CD of songs, rhymes, words and stories; each CD comes with a lyric sheet and a helpful parents guide.

How to interact with it: Count out your own candies along with *Des bonbons au chocolat*. Or have her blow out candles on a birthday cake during *Joyeux Anniversaire*.

How'd we like it?: It was hard to get my kids to sit still and listen at home, so we tried the French CD in the car. While driving, I couldn't exactly flip open the lyric sheet to translate, so that meant I needed language lessons, too. Also, the French songs were so soothing that they almost sounded like lullabies; I'd probably let the CD play while they slept. Maybe they'll wake up speaking French!

Details: Random House; \$16.95 each, www.livinglanguage.com, Barnes & Noble, Borders

Learning Friend Lily

Ages: 12 months and older

What it is: A Spanish-English bilingual frog that sings in either language if you press the button on her foot; from LeapFrog.

How to interact with it: When she sings "Hola, soy Lily," have your child say the Spanish phrase with his or her name in the place of Lily's. Or, have your child try to guess what Lily is saying in the Spanish version of each song.

How'd we like it?: The older kids didn't care much for Lily, but the 2-year-old liked listening to her sing, for a little while, anyway. Because we could actually learn something from her -- and because she's reasonably priced -- I'd probably add Lily to our stable of LeapFrog products.

Details: \$19.99, www.leapfrog.com

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